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14.6 Implications of Brexit for Chinese Educational Tourists in the UK

Rong Huang

14.6.1 Introduction

This case study discusses and evaluates implications of *Brexit* for educational tourism in the UK, and for Chinese international students in particular. It is organised into three parts. First, it presents impacts of Chinese international students in the UK. Second, it discusses Chinese international students' mobility and the implications of *Brexit*. Finally, it explores post-*Brexit* options for UK universities to attract Chinese international students.

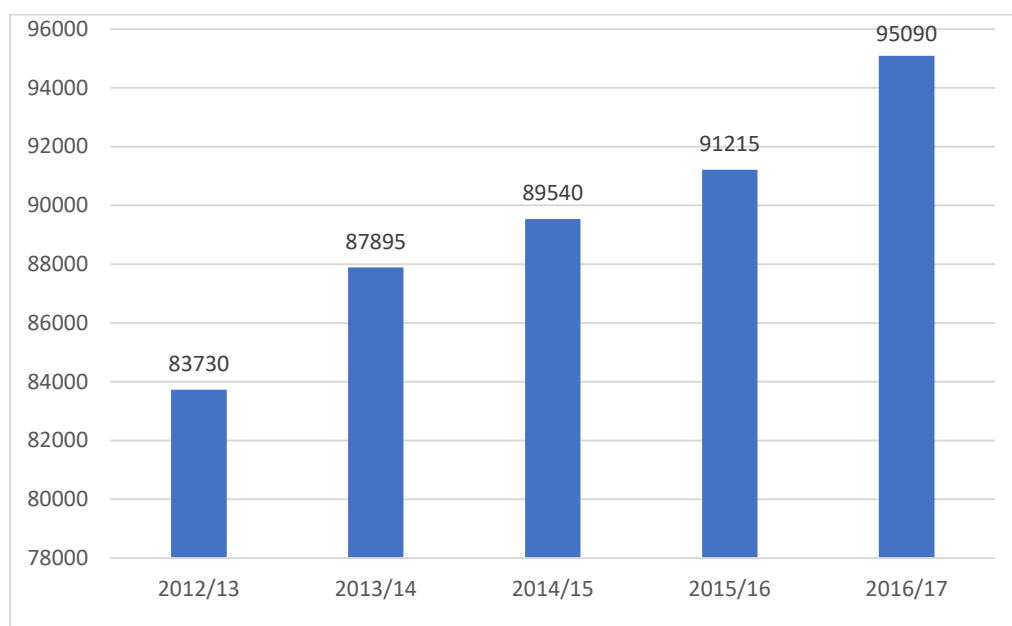
By conceptualising the international student experience in relation to different tourist experiences, as theorised in the existing tourism literature, and through her primary research of Chinese international students in the UK, Huang (2005, 2008) argued that international students are not just normal students, but are more like tourists. International students in the UK promote invaluable economic, societal and cultural benefits, and generate employment across the UK. The prospect of stagnating or declining numbers of international students as a result of *Brexit* is a major concern to higher education institutions (HEIs) (Universities UK, 2017).

14.6.2 Impacts of Chinese international students in the UK

The provision of higher education for international students has become an important source of income for Western universities (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Due to their reputation for 'high quality', British universities attract a significant number of international students every year. The United Kingdom is currently the second most popular destination for international students after the United States (Universities UK, 2017). Given China's population of approximately 1.3bn people, the Chinese market provides huge potential for UK universities. This is for two main reasons: the increasing disposable income of mainland Chinese people, and the relaxation of outbound travel restrictions by the Chinese government (Cai, O'Leary and Boger, 2000).

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2018a), for the academic year 2016-17, 81 per cent of students studying in higher education in the UK were native, six per cent were from the rest of the EU, and thirteen per cent were from the rest of the world. The total number of non-UK students studying in the UK was 442,375, and the number of Chinese students far exceeded any other nationality (HESA, 2018b): almost one third of non-EU students in the UK being from China. Figure 14.1 indicates the number of Chinese students studying in the UK since 2012.

Figure 14.1 Number of Chinese students studying in the UK, 2012-2017



Source: HESA, 2018b.

Based on their detailed scrutiny of HESA data, Prazeres and Findlay (2017) revealed that many countries showed a consistent pattern of decline in sending students to the UK over the four-year span of their study. They reported that the largest reductions in numbers from within the EU were among students from Greece, Ireland and Germany. From outside the EU, there was also evidence of the UK becoming less attractive as a study destination. India, for many years, was a significant source of students to UK but has shown a serious collapse in student numbers (HESA, 2018b)). Other non-EU sources (e.g. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) also exhibited a reduction in international student migration to the UK over the four-year period. In the context of the highly marketised landscape of global higher education, Findlay, Prazeres, McCollum *et al.* (2017) argued that it should be of great concern that the UK had become less attractive in so many key markets.

While the effects of the 2016 *Brexit* vote had yet to manifest themselves on incoming student numbers, Prazeres and Findlay (2017) suggested that changes to student visas, tuition fee increases, and UK immigration policies had already contributed adversely to the profile of international student mobility to the UK (see also Chapter 12). It was anticipated that the immigration rhetoric associated with *Brexit* would have even more profound effects (Stone, 2016; Viña, 2016). According to HESA (2018b) data, it is clear that China, as the biggest source country for UK higher education, was the only market showing a significant increase in student numbers (fourteen per cent increase since 2012-13). Students from China make up a sizeable share of international student fee income and their continued interest and contribution to UK higher education is critical to the UK's higher education sector (Hubble and Bolton, 2018).

Further, the importance of international students to the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market is gradually being recognised by researchers, and several studies examining the student-related VFR market have been carried out in Australia, for example (Michael, Armstrong and King, 2003; Taylor, Shanka and Pope, 2004; Tham Min-En, 2006; Weaver, 2003). Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis (2007) addressed this issue from a UK perspective and

stress that this segment can represent an important component of tourism demand and therefore should receive more attention from a marketing perspective than it has in the past. According to *VisitBritain* (2017b), students made up 42 per cent of the nights spent by Chinese visitors in the UK: China is thus a key market for study tourism.

Huang and Tian (2013) examined, from a tourism perspective, the experience of Chinese international students in the UK. Based on their analysis of 321 usable questionnaires, they found that more than 42 per cent of the students had received visits from their families living in China since they had arrived in the UK to study. This provides strong evidence of the importance of Chinese international students for the VFR market in the UK.

14.6.3 Chinese international students' mobility and implications of Brexit

According to Packwood, Findlay and McCollum (2015), international students enrolled at UK universities have been motivated by many factors, the most frequently cited being the desire to enrol at a world class university (82 per cent), and the opportunity to pursue an international career (61 per cent). In relation to Chinese international students in the UK, Huang (2005, 2013) argued that the most important motivation factors for coming to the UK were to gain a better understanding of 'Western culture' through education, to gain a foreign qualification, and to travel. However, *Brexit* introduced a range of both negative and positive implications for international students' mobility to, and within, the UK. Although based on the recent data of Chinese international students' application to study in the UK, Morrison (2019) argues that Brexit uncertainty proving no bar to international students, QS finds that one in five prospective international students would be put off studying in the UK if it leaves the EU. More than a third (36 per cent) of students would be more likely to study in Britain if Brexit did not happen (QS, 2019). The paper explores the negative and positive implications in relation to Chinese students.

Negative implications

A range of negative implications have been identified and discussed by academics and the media. Some key points are summarised below

(a) The UK's unwelcoming image

Dennis (2016) argued that until the UK's EU withdrawal terms were clarified, international students, from Europe and the wider world, might view the UK as an unwelcoming country, possibly resulting in such students enrolling in other English-speaking countries. Viggo (2017) considered that "visa and work restrictions combined with the global publicity that *Brexit* has received make the students feel less welcome in the UK". According to Hobsons (2017), when choosing a destination, international students are highly motivated by how welcome they feel. Giving international students a strong sense of welcome is therefore critical. However, most EU students (82 per cent) considered the UK less attractive for study following the Brexit vote. Although some Chinese applicants were reported as not being influenced by the referendum outcome (Chen, 2016), some in China had considered other English-speaking countries as their study destinations for more open cultural possibilities. Emerging powers in Asia and elsewhere are fast becoming educational hubs and offer courses taught in English: *Brexit* may render these destinations more inviting to Chinese students.

However, the UK's unwelcoming image caused less concern comparing what Trump administration has done. It tightened visa requirements for Chinese students, especially those studying science and technology, amid mounting concerns about espionage (Turner, 2019). Furthermore, several Chinese academics who taught in American universities were fired by their universities for similar reason. Hence, comparing with Brexit, a series of American

policies and activities made Chinese students feel even less welcomed to study at the USA. Subsequently, the number of Chinese students wanting to study in the US has declined for academic year 2019/2020.

(b) Brexit means immigration restrictions for European citizens and this might also mean more controls for non-EU visitors

The UK government's rejection of post-study work visa schemes (ComRes, 2016) taken along with the prevailing anti-immigration rhetoric of the UK's post-*Brexit* debate was likely to affect prospective students' perceptions and consideration of pursuing higher education in the UK (Universities UK, 2017). Some of these students could otherwise have been attracted to the UK as a destination for higher education, with the possibility of securing better employment opportunities upon graduation (Findlay, Prazeres, McCollum *et al.*, 2017) than in their 'home' country (Bozionelos, Bozionelos, Kostopoulos *et al.*, 2015). The BBC (2016) reported such factors appeared to further dampen prospects of any recovery in international student numbers. The effects within EU countries were likely to be strongest, but perhaps more critical to UK universities would be the effect on perceptions of the UK as a study destination for students from China.

(c) Fewer EU students and more Chinese students mean even less international experience to be gained from the courses

Stone (2016) reported that too little was known of the likely status of EU students in the UK following Britain's exit. However, it seemed likely that fewer EU students would consider enrolling in higher education in the UK in the immediate future. China was already the largest contributor in terms of student numbers and revenue for UK higher education (HESA, 2018b), and continued growth in the number of Chinese students had been witnessed in many British universities in 2017 (Durnin, 2017). Were there too many Chinese students in the UK? Chi (2018) reported that most Chinese students found they only mixed with their national counterparts in isolated groups on campus, and then often only with those on their own course, and thus gained limited international experience. Some Chinese parents feared that educational courses in the UK were losing their British character (Wei, 2017) as institutes made too many adaptations of the courses to recruit more Chinese students, and certainly some students reported that they had too many of their compatriots in their classes (Huang, 2013).

Positive implications

While Highman (2017) clearly highlighted *Brexit*-related issues facing UK higher education, an analysis of articles published by the Chinese media outlets *China Daily* and *The South China Post* suggested that educational businesses and Chinese students seemed rather to have focused on potential *Brexit* benefits and opportunities. Some of these reported positive implications are summarised below.

(a) A devalued pound means lower tuition fees ...

According to Warrell (2017), non-EU international students in particular were able to make savings when the post-referendum weakened pound reduced the actual cost of their £13,500 annual undergraduate tuition fees. She reckoned that Chinese students would have benefitted from a thirteen per cent cut in the cost of fees between the June referendum and December 2016 (those students paying in US dollars would have saved seventeen per cent, and those using the South African rand twenty per cent).

(b) ... and cheaper shopping prices

After the Brexit vote, Loh (2016) reported that while many Britons were mourning the UK's imminent exit from the European Union, international students were celebrating the weaker pound which resulted in not only lower tuition fees but also cheaper shopping prices. Chinese media carried reports of students cheering lower tuition fees and going on shopping sprees in the UK (Chen, 2016; He, 2016). Due to weaker sterling, more Chinese tourists were reported making purchases in London shops (Crabtree, 2017).

(c) Easier to find a job or start a business in the UK after graduation

A report from Learning without Borders (cited in Chen, 2016), a London-based global education platform, suggested that after the *Brexit* referendum it expected the number of EU students studying in the UK to be reduced. This meant less competition and more opportunities for Chinese students (Chen, 2016). Further, the UK government's proposal to reduce company taxes, combined with the fall in the value of the pound, made the UK more attractive for Chinese postgraduates who wanted to start a business there (Wang, 2017). Zhao (2017) also supported this argument, adding that post-*Brexit* Chinese students and investors could enjoy more equal status with those from EU countries, and therefore there could be more opportunities for them than previously.

14.6.4 Post-Brexit options to recruit more Chinese students

There have been both short- and long-term implications of the *Brexit* vote for international student mobility. Considering the above discussion, the following should be noted by UK HEIs in addressing potential implications of *Brexit* for Chinese international students.

(a) Reconsidering motivations to study in the UK

Based on an extensive survey of international students, Hobsons (2017) concluded that they want a high-quality education at an affordable cost in a place where they will feel welcome. Hence, when seeking to recruit international students, universities need to articulate their value proposition clearly and demonstrate what they can offer in each of these three areas.

Mok, Han, Jiang *et al.* (2017) reported that most Chinese students felt that their international learning experiences had positively contributed to their careers, citing career services and alumni networks as offering benefits. Soft skills – such as foreign language proficiency – were also reported as advantageous when applying for jobs. Chinese students and their parents are increasingly looking for British universities that can provide more rounded experiences, opportunities outside course study, and well-being support. Chi (2018) argued that those British universities which can create and demonstrate that they provide both 'soft skills' and effective welfare support for those that are thousands of miles from home, will quickly develop a positive and lasting reputation that can support more traditional selling factors.

Further, there is a range of activities which British universities could undertake to improve the employability of Chinese international students in the UK. For instance, as Huang, Turner and Chen (2014) suggested, before universities emphasise the importance of employability to Chinese students, they should understand what their students' views are. In order to help Chinese students to develop their employability, universities should consider using different types of assessments to examine knowledge and abilities of the students. The importance of the whole experience of being an international student in the UK should be emphasised. Further, based on apparent differences in perceived benefits of international education among Chinese students at different type of universities, Huang and Turner (2018) suggested that individual institutions might want to reconsider their strategies for enhancing employability and engaging with international students. In particular, individual institutions

needed to appreciate that Mainland Chinese students were not a homogeneous cohort (Iannelli and Huang, 2014).

(b) Keeping the UK as an attractive study destination

Corbett (2016) and Lowe (2016) reported that the UK had the most satisfied international students compared to its key competitors (e.g. USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) on all aspects of the student experience. Considering how they are treated on arrival, their learning experience, the support they receive and their living conditions, such students were more likely to recommend the UK system as a first choice. Further, a major attraction is that UK research has been conducted within an increasingly global network, and the UK has remained a world leader in research and innovation, boasting the highest field-weighted citation impact of any country, and ranking second in the world on the Global Innovation Index (OECD, 2013).

Rogelja (cited in Mardell, 2017) has warned against the ‘commercialisation of British academia’ and the ‘transformation of higher education institutes into degree mills’. Mardell (2017) pointed out that *Brexit* was threatening (or promising), to take UK higher education in a more China-orientated direction, and it was clear that careful consideration would be required concerning the likely consequences of pursuing an ever more China-orientated solution to potential *Brexit* problems.

(c) Improving visa policies related to international students

Many foreign countries like the USA and some European countries including the UK place more restrictions for Chinese students working in the countries after their studies. Such actions have damaged attractiveness of Britain as a destination to study. Critical review of the purpose of such policies and their consequence is necessary to better develop visa requirements for international students.

Department for Education (DfE) has recently announced international students would be given visa extensions of up to a year to look for work in the UK as part of a package of government measures to boost numbers of overseas students after *Brexit* (the Guardian, 2019). Although such initiative is welcomed, more could have been done to help it achieve the objectives of its new international education strategy.

14.6.5 Conclusion

This case study has discussed the implications of *Brexit* for the recruitment of Chinese international students into UK universities, and their role as tourists and VFR tourism generators, as numbers from other key international student source countries diminish. The Chinese media seem to have generated a positive discourse on *Brexit* for Chinese students. Potential options for UK universities to recruit more Chinese students emphasise the need to reconsider their motivations to study in the UK and to sustain the UK as an attractive study destination, not least through drawing on a diversity of source markets.

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Turner, C (2019) Trade war with US driving Chinese students to Britain, study reveals, available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/28/trade-war-us-driving-chinese-students-britain-study-reveals/> , accessed on 31/05/2019